Queerly Feminine Elsewhere: Rethinking Femme-ininity as Camp Disidentificatory Sensibility

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Abstract

This research delves into a recent popularization of femme-identifying Queer, Trans, and Intersex People of Colour (QTIPOC) in English-speaking queer (sub)culture. Despite its increased usage in gender identification ('I am femme'), everyday sensibilities ('I feel extra femme') and queer nightlife, its impact on the meaning of femme has yet to be articulated centring their trans and racialized liminality. What happens to femme when QTIPOC subjects who are not necessarily women nor lesbian increasingly employ femme? Existing discourses on femme, many of which are situated in Lesbian Studies, have been criticized for their preoccupation with visibility. Scholars tended to conceptualize femme-ininity focusing on its representational aspects to prove resistance, thereby drawing a firm boundary between femme-ininity and other femininities. As to break away from this tendency, some theorists recently suggested an affect-centred approach that leaves representation aside. However, their resolutions dissolve the problems accompanying QTIPOC visibility and their visual legacies for the sake of an ensured corporeal transgression. Meanwhile, QTIPOC femme-ininity pushes beyond the theoretical impetus of Lesbian Femme Studies by aptly reconciling this dichotomic debate between visible transgression and corporeal paradigm shift. Critically extending from this conversation, this paper aims to sketch QTIPOC femme-ininity by means of camp sensibility. Camp's disidentificatory character relocates the focus from recognition to ephemeral initiation of sensibility, accounting for femme-ininity as both semiotic and corporeal. Recreating femme in its ambivalence and contradictions, QTIPOC femmes make new worlds of being feminine and doing femininity as they become more and more visible.

Introduction: Roaming the Femme-inine Elsewhere amid Popularization

Throughout the last decade, I have noticed a steady increase in the visibility of femme identification in queer popular media, particularly when it pertains to underrepresented Queer, Trans and Intersex People of Color (QTIPOC). As a phenomenon, QTIPOC femme popularization manifests twofold: self-identification among queer subcultural celebrities, and queer community-making under the term femme.

The phenomenon of self-identification is prevalent among many QTIPOC femmes within various ranges of the feminine spectrum. The rising number of femme-identifying QTIPOC as a phenomenon is documented well by *Them*, an inclusive queer media platform that has gained increasing popularity. In its video titled "Munroe Bergdorf Explains the History of the Word 'Femme,'" Bergdorf, a Black trans woman, defines femme as having "started from denoting feminine queer woman, now encompassing many feminine shades of meaning" (Bergdorf 2018). With the voice of a Black femme, *Them* clarifies that femme is an identity not exclusively adopted by lesbian women but has been expanded to include "non-binary and/or gender non-conforming people who don't strictly identify as women but are on the feminine end of spectrum" (Them 2018).

The latter manifestation is showcased through an increasing use of the term 'femme' in queer community-making. I have witnessed and experienced many of these creative spaces in London, England, ranging from club nights to activist collectives. For instance, Femmes of Color Collective uses music, community events and meetings to establish a space for femme-identifying queers of colour. Gal Pals is also a distinctly femininity-centric night out event in Brighton and London. FEMMI-ERRECT, too, is a bi-monthly club night promoted under the catchphrase "a night by femmes for femmes." Similarly, Femmetopia, a biweekly club night at the venue VFDalston, also aims to make a safer space for QTIPOC femmes with their policy called 'femmifesto.' The same goes for Pxssy Palace, which aims to "become a space for women and femmes of colour to party free from discrimination" (Manatakis 2018).

Reviewing intellectual conversations on femme, I have found that there are many well-researched works written by femmes that are motivated by self-reflection. That being said, I still find gaps when it comes to the specific identification of QTIPOC femme as potentially non-lesbian, non-woman, non-white performances of femininity. This paper emerges out of my hunger, both as an observer and a member of the QTIPOC femme community, to theorize how we attune ourselves to this euphoric melody of femme-ininity. Unlike many scholars who begin their analysis with an assumption that femmes are lesbian women, my argument starts alongside hitherto provincialized QTIPOC femmes. This establishes the difference between the existing literature and my contribution. Femme-ininity here is a specific genre of femininity that many queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people attune themselves to (Levitt and Collins 2019; Shelton 2018), one which does not necessarily translate to lesbian, woman, or female. I regard femme-ininity as embodied characteristics of racialized femininity that resonates with many QTIPOC femmes' identification and gendered performance, rather than as one counterpart in the desiring duality of butch-femme correspondence.

How, then, do we theorize femme-ininity with QTIPOC femmes in mind? Shall I regard femme-ininity as something visible or corporeal? How do I possibly interpret, learn from, and/or challenge existing theories on femme while keeping these racialized and trans femininities in mind, and while also accounting for plural shapes of femme-ininity. To answer this question, I conducted discourse analysis to discover that two intermingling tropes recur with regards to visibility: dichotomic preoccupation between visibility-invisibility and resistance-conformity. The second set, resistance-conformity, is concomitantly associated with the former, as the desire for recognition motivates representational preoccupation. In this paper, I will demonstrate

the dynamics between these two dichotomic sets of concepts through three junctures: 1) the logical impasse of denoting visible-invisible difference; 2) racial divergence pluralizing the visibility rhetoric; and 3) unveiling the very idea of queer resistance.

Subsequently, I examine two femme scholars', Hannah McCann and Ulrika Dahl, resolution to the problematics of representation with the corporeal turn. While I agree with their suggestion to think beyond signification, I assert that we cannot evade representation so easily. I question the dichotomic framework of such a 'shift' and critically question their distinction. In particular, I warn against dismissing QTIPOC femme cultural legacies, which have been scarcely spotlighted in femme discourse, for the sake of hastily declaring a ground-breaking corporeal alterity. Instead of suggesting a new definition of femme that can overcome old problems, I seek to elucidate femme-ininity in ways that both affirm its visual culture yet remains critical of the racially gendered struggles. In the final part of this paper, I contend that thinking with camp sensibility can elucidate femme-ininity in its polyvalence, troubling the two aforementioned common tropes of visibility-invisibility and resistance-conformity, while extending QTIPOC cultural tradition. Aiming particularly to portray this racialized and trans shape of femme-ininity, my paper reassesses QTIPOC femme-ininity as a camp, disidentificatory sensibility. The power of cultural representations, discursive histories of femme, and my corporeal belonging as femme are all imbricated in this piece, together.

Reviewing Femme Studies Towards a QTIPOC Shape of Femme-ininity

Discursive Danger of Separating Femme with Representational Difference

Reviewing femme discourses from the 1990s until the present in light of QTIPOC femmes, I found that "the trope of visibility" (Walker 1993, 868) commonly appears. There are two key modes of visibility. Firstly, visibility means the ability to be captured visually, meaning that they are representational. Secondly, visibility implies the extent of being seen, where any scholarly or cultural attention femmes receive amounts to higher visibility. The former is associated more with the visible, and the latter with the invisible. In other words, the first register situates femme-ininity as visibly divergent from hegemonic femininity because appearance is "intimately tied up with recognition of femme identity" (Carolin and Bewley 1998, 112-3). Meanwhile, the second register attends to whether femme is academically or culturally seen, and often appears in femme scholars' bitter awareness that femmes have been underrepresented. While "appearing butch announces lesbianism to the public" (Kennedy and Davis 1992, 64), femmes have remained in private or even been "conflated into straight femininity" (Dahl 2012, 63).

Scholars often presuppose the former, visuality of femme, and call for resisting the latter, femme invisibility. These recurring, seemingly incompatible ideas share the same premise: that there is a boundary between compliant femininity and femme-ininity, only to commonly revere femme into an honorary warrior who saves other femininities from patriarchy. Such a viewpoint has been often repeated in Femme Studies since the 1990s (Harris and Crocker 1998; Munt & Smyth 1998; Nestle 1992), yet is not limited to works of that time period. Most recently, Hoskin and Taylor (2019) theorized femme as a pertinent analytic scope that "offers possibilities that normativity never could" (296). Evident in this framing of femme-ininity is the need for femmes to represent differences that distinguish them from static, complicit, and problematic femininities. However, this dualistic composition not only binds 'complicit' femininity, but also limits femme potential. Many scholars have criticized this tendency in femme scholarship for foreclosing broader connections and potential solidarity among femininities (Galewski 2005; Hemmings 1998, 1999, 2007; McCann 2017; Walker 1993). Moreover, it elides differences

within normative femininity as well as the ways in which femininities change through time and space, shaping them as static despite their "variety according to different ages, culture and lifestyle" (Carolin and Bewley 1998, 113).

While hegemonic femininity should be appraised critically, femme-ininity cannot be regarded as an ensured transgressive model of femininity to visually stand against it. Walker (1993) indicates the danger of such a strictly polarizing paradigm because when "constructs of given identity invest certain signifiers with political value, figures that do not present those signifiers are often neglected" (868). If we consider femme-ininity as visually distinguishable from 'conventional' femininity, let alone its plurality, overlapping rubrics of femininities among femmes and in relation to others fades into neglection, further ostracizing "femmes with intermediate or unmarked gender styles" (Rubin 2006, 472) who are often recognized as 'compliant,' Hence, my portrayal of QTIPOC femme should be able to account for the "liminality between genres of femininity" (Scott 2021, 8). Among many genres of femininity, femme-ininity here is not positioned as a radical break, but implies as much privilege and contradiction as it does resistance. I follow Hemmings' (2013) encouragement "to account for femininities as both deeply flawed and transformable, to see all difficulties in femininity as located and transformable" (342).

Divergent Racialized Registers of Visibility
I further question the preoccupation for femme visibility alongside the resistance-compliance binary that underlies it. For whom could femme visibility be celebrated? And for which others is visibility unachievable or even dangerous?

Critical femininity scholars commonly conclude with an encouragement to be vigilant of racial dynamics. For instance, eight scholars in Critical Femininity Studies unanimously agreed on the "importance to work on how femininity is not reducible to the gender trouble of white, middle class, heterosexual cisgendered women" (Dahl et al. 2018, 393). Similarly, early femme interlocutors like Walker (1993) warned against

"celebrating visible signifiers of difference" (869) when advocating for the value of femme-ininity. Whatling (1998), too, pointed out the exclusionary mechanisms of visibility politics in terms of race. Many others have also underscored the necessity to reflect on racial implications within the femme discourse (Dahl 2011, 2012, 2017; Lewis 2006; Mishali 2014). However, while the whiteness of discourse is commonly criticized, complicated cultural reading with regards to race is more likely to be called for than actually being conducted, thereby again relegated into the future. Panuska (2019) shares my concern in her analysis on camp discourse, warning against such an academic tendency to 'procrastinate' racialized readings.

To complement this gap and reorient QTIPOC subjects in femme discourse in their differences, I consider two seemingly incompatible forms of racialized femme visibility. They are two extreme poles of a much messier landscape, admittedly to emphasize intra-femme divergence to trouble the de-racialized mantra of 'femmes look resistant.' Firstly, I consider femme hypervisibility and its endangering impacts. To ameliorate racist implications in the visibility rhetoric, one impulse could be to increase the visibility of femmes of colour, both culturally and academically. However, increasing visibility without a reparative reorientation of discourse or a fundamental change in racial inequalities may lead to unfavourable consequence for femmes of colour. Acknowledging "racism's shaping role in the construction of gender" (Tudor 2019, 361), I particularly warn against the dangers present within hypervisibility. Considering the role of neoliberalism in politics of visibility, Banet-Weiser (2018) writes that "simply becoming visible does not guarantee that identity categories such as gender, race, and sexuality will be unfettered from sexism, misogyny, and homophobia" (11). This is precisely because "marginalized subjects, subjects of difference, are punished and disciplined precisely when the spotlight falls on them" (25) where the result of increasing visibility becomes worrisome. Indeed, Panuska (2019) saliently criticizes that defining

queerly feminine performance with a marker such as exaggeration "has a much different impact and resonance for POC who are often marked, by default, as excessive and spectacular" (161). For these femmes, heightened visibility is not so much a badge of queer resistance but a threat to their safety. For instance, many QTIPOC femme subcultural celebrities have long articulated that becoming 'seen' simultaneously implies a danger of harassment and safety: Alok Vaid-Menon's book *Femmes in Public*, Travis Alabanza's show *Burgerz*, and poetry book *Before I (you) Step Outside, Love Me* all candidly document the racialized precarity of presenting as femme in public.

On the other hand, I think of femme invisibility with a short film in mind. Directed by Amrou Al-Kadhi, *Victoria Sin's Drag Transformation* features a nonbinary drag queen, Sin Wai Kin (formerly known as Victoria Sin). The film emphasizes Kin's experiences of "subtle violations of [their] femininity" (Al-Kadhi 2017) in their drag career that occurs because they were not assigned male at birth and they are not white. Kin offers an opportunity to think about invisibility as racial violence: their queer identity is often dismissed, even if they are in drag, due to their ethnicity. The film eloquently reveals the burden on QTIPOC to 'prove' their queerness visually, despite the fact that the terms of such visual recognition as queer is not designed with racialization in mind. Similarly, Gopinath's (in Dahl et al. 2018) diasporic reading of South Asian femininity addresses the difficulty "to see the queerness of what may initially look like normative femininity" (385-6). If we follow the visibility-oriented definition to find femme resistance, some QTIPOC femmes "lose their denaturalizing power and queer subject position [whenever] they pass into hetero-obscurity" (Hemmings 2007, 161). Therefore, the contrasting examples of hypervisibility and invisibility of queer femininity emerging due to racialization unsettles the very epistemological frame of the femme visibility paradigm.

Unpacking the Premise Behind the Recognition of Resistance

Throughout Femme Studies' long endeavour to theorize femme visibility, the idea of resistance is incessantly evoked. Resistance, understood as a conceptual aim of femme theorization, engages with visibility in two ways: on one hand, if femme-ininity is visibly distinguishable from other (usually more conventional) femininities, it is because it reflects femmes' agency to counter the norms of femininity. Here, agency equals choice for resistance that is marked visually. Academics in the 90s in particular considered "visible differences as a locus of political agency" (Walker 1993, 868) to oppose the radical (lesbian) feminist position that "disregards femme-ininity as oppressively recreating heterosexual dynamics" (Bergdorf 2018). On the other hand, even when femme-ininity is invisible to the eye, it is still maintained as insurgent because seeming compliance is argued as voluntary. This is to challenge the viewpoint that femme invisibility means conflation with straight femininity, which is a misrecognition at best and an offense at worst.

In both arguments, resistance is derived from complete voluntarism. Intention becomes a mechanism to complement or make up for seeming compliance so that femmes can be awarded the medal of transgression either way. This is discursively motivated by Lesbian Studies' trivialization of femme compared to butch, and largely social devaluation of femininity, against which many femme theorists refuted with the idea of choice (Case 1988; Nestle 1992). However, assuming that choice is inherently resistant inadvertently reproduces the idea that "feminine embodiment [...] without willful intention is problematic" (McCann 2018, 286). Dahl (2011) notes academics' individualist inclination "to over-valorize 'agency' whereby voluntary intentionality is presented as radical political acts," (175) and criticizes it for "fitting uncannily well within late capitalist and neoliberal logics (181-2). Considering the unequal conditions of visibility and its outcomes, not all injurious experiences from 'furiously subverting' femininity is equally resolvable and

reversible. Femme resistance should not resort to complete voluntarism to complement some failures of visible registers where consciousness equals transgression. Following Butler's (2004) assertion that "agency is always paradoxical and constituted within a social world which one does not choose" (3), I argue that finding femme resistance within voluntary agency conscripts QTIPOC femmes to be the face of resistance—a frontline warrior of queerness without bulletproof privileges.

To further unpack the premise behind complete voluntarism as a ground for femme resistance, I find it instructive to consider Trans Studies' interlocution against idealization of resistant queer subject. Throughout queer studies, there has been an impulse to cast trans people as an ideal queer subject who challenge biological determinism. Becoming trans is then formulated as a choice against a biological 'reality' and subsequently awarded a medal of queer transgression. Hemmings (2017) connects femme idealization vis à vis such an impulse, albeit in the opposite direction. If trans subjects have been valorized within a limitedly reversal-oriented parameter (that is, only when one opposes one's assigned gender at birth does one become resistant), femmes have been considered to be "displaying an unfortunate coincidence of body and gender" (161). Then, femmes have to claim intentionality of their feminine identification and presentation, whether it is visually distinguishable or not. Not only such presumption erases trans femmes' existence, but also both conventions judge queer resistance based on the subject's intention to resist. Mishali (2014) problematizes such reversal-oriented formulation for it "produces yet another form of determinism" that fixes the meaning of "transgenderism as the aspired pole one should assimilate to, while femininity continues to signify the fixation one should free oneself of" (63-4). Indeed, I concur with her that "praising specific, readable forms of cross-genderism excludes many who cannot live the queer ideal of mobility" (Mishali 2014, 64), often erasing the "dangerous circumstance of cross-identification" (Muñoz 1999, 30). Hastily crowning femmes as 'resistant' elides the

divergent outcomes of QTIPOC femme-ininity and invokes a limited idea of complete voluntarism. Hence, the very rhetoric of 'resistance' should be reformulated in the context of disciplinary forces for femme.

Existing Studies' Corporeal Resolution to Representational Problems

Take a Corporeal Turn

To recapitulate, the femme visibility paradigm was fueled by a scholarly desire to prove femme resistance, which had resulted in an impasse between the two dichotomic sets (visibility-invisibility and resistance-conformity) I have covered in the previous section of this paper. Before I propose my elaboration of femme to suggest a way out of this impasse, I shortly review two contemporary femme scholars' suggestions: Dahl (2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2017) and McCann (2017, 2018) both attributed the problematics of the femme visibility impasse to the politics of recognition. Dahl (2012) observes that "emphasis is placed on femme recognition that centers whether femmes look normative or queer" (175). Similarly, McCann (2018) identifies a persistent "tendency to establish the queer 'difference' of femme from a representational identity politics perspective" (286) which inhibits other possibilities of femme theorization. Critiquing the preoccupation with representation, visibility, and signification, both scholars convincingly raise concern over the partiality of femme representational paradigm for unequivocally privileging cisnormative and racially biased femme-ininity.

Their shared insight is that both visibility and resistance rhetoric arise from an underlying premise that presumes a body before social inscription, which then requires visible adornment to be recognized of its feminine insurgence. Therefore, an alternative paradigm should be able to "transcend representation and the logic of empowerment versus disempowerment" (McCann 2017, 117). Dahl (2012) theorizes femme as "a complex process of materialization that exceeds our current

epistemologies" (59). The focus is relocated from what femme is (determined by how femme *looks*) into what femme does (interrelated to how femme *feels*), which coincides with the move from "politics of recognition (as different and queer) towards a politics of *imperceptibility*" (Dahl 2011, 183, italics mine). This is what I call a 'femme corporeal turn' and it is situated within a broader discourse in Critical Theory that aims to break free of representation.

Resolution or Dissolution? Reviewing Corporeal Suggestions

My analysis is indebted to these two interlocutors, who have endeavoured towards more affirmative shapes of femme-ininity. While both attribute the femme visibility impasse to a preoccupation with the visible, Dahl and McCann assume slightly different positions. Dahl focuses more on the interlinked nature between body (soma) and signification (techne), whereas McCann casts the two as oppositional and promises more utopian visions of somatic femme-ininity.

Femme paradigmatic dispute is situated in a larger philosophical debate that positions the corporeal as oppositional to the cultural. The idea of a corporeal turn not only frames, but also reconfigures previous discourses on femme to support its claim. To present affect as a ground-breaking alterity, the cultural is reduced "into factionalizing, identitarian and particularistic preoccupations that have splintered the Left into identitarian sects" (Butler 1997, 265). This narrative sharply becomes one of critical paranoia versus a "reparative return to the bodily experience" (Hemmings 2005, 553). Overstating Cultural Studies' logical problems, which parallels femme visibility narrative in this case, a disputable claim of 'merely cultural' has started to trend "to herald affect's unique capacity to resolve contemporary critical dilemmas" (Hemmings 2005, 556). Hemmings (2005) saliently points out the reductive positioning of cultural theory that positions affect as 'the new cutting edge' while "ignoring the counter-hegemonic contributions of postcolonial and feminist theorists, only thereby positioning affect

as 'the answer' to contemporary problems of cultural theory" (548). Butler (1997) steps further to remind us that obliteration of representative ethos does not necessarily resolve existing problems of representation, but ends up taking the place of what they aimed to dismantle. I follow Butler's (1997) conclusion that "the only possible unity will not be the synthesis of a set of conflicts, but will be a mode of *sustaining conflict in politically productive ways* […] without exactly becoming each other" (269, italics mine). Affect, however important, should not be regarded as the only way "to draw out productive contradictions" (McCann 2017, 118). McCann's corporeal transgression dilutes issues concerning racialized, trans axes, rather than thoroughly addressing them. By rhetorically relegating all issues into the visibility paradigm, they are only dissolved rather than thoroughly resolved.

Dahl's somatechnical approach seems to be more persuasive as it better maps the interrelations between the cultural and the material with the concept of vulnerability. Dahl draws from Butler's (2016) understanding of vulnerability which is induced by normative ideals of femininity and manifests as jealousy or insecurity between femmes. Framing femme vulnerability as an ontological condition, Dahl's concept of femme-ininity then cannot be disentangled from other femininities, allowing for a co-constitutive relationship between femininities. In addition, at the core of this mapping lies a critique towards hegemonic forms of feminine ideals, including white supremacy, so it also competently accounts for racially divergent registers of visibility. Vulnerability is racially distributed and ontological, and femmes do not have to reversely overcome it with complete voluntarism. In this regard, Dahl (2012) seems to succeed at "rethinking femme beyond liberal identity politics steeped in visual recognition" (176).

While Dahl's account is persuasive to resolve the tensions of femme visibility impasse, I argue that associating soma and techne with vulnerability, an ontological register manifesting in representation, falls short of incorporating visual

culture. In other words, vulnerability as a juncture to seek beyond visibility paradigm, in the process, loses an emphasis on visuality. The direction of Dahl's application of somatechnics is worth pointing out to show where this dissatisfaction comes from. Somatechnics incorporates body, technology, power, and disciplines that inform and deconstruct the concept of the body that language has held. Here, the term is oriented around the body, maneuvering representational aspects to undermine the materially intact idea of the body (Stryker 2006). Dahl employs this framework towards an opposite direction: she brings body into signification-imbued femme discourse to overcome the representational impasse. Therefore, her emphasis falls on proving the somatic dimensions of femme-ininity, accounting for interrelations mainly in terms of bringing soma into techne, and scarcely the other way around. In other words, Dahl focuses on showing how bringing the somatic can promise change from the "pitfalls of writing the body out of theory" as Hemmings (2005, 250) wrote, leaving under-addressed how, then, techne imbricates and sparks those somatic experiences. QTIPOC femmes have a rich culture of insurgent performances that has been insufficiently captured by both cultural and corporeal discourses on femme. My following suggestion is to paint femme-ininity as camp sensibility to remedy such an oversight of visual culture while sustaining the insight by Dahl and McCann's femme corporeal turn.

Illuminating Femme-ininity as Disidentificatory Camp Sensibility

Let me return to the question: how do we theorize QTIPOC femme-ininity without falling into a visibility impasse? Reviewing corporeal inquiries, I raised the concern that they might dissolve representational elements for the sake of a paradigm shift. Although my aim resembles Dahl and McCann, my suggestion is to instead incorporate affect into the discourse of visuality by orienting femme-ininity as camp sensibility. I formulate QTIPOC femme-ininity through camp,

which is a highly visual and ephemeral sensibility and demonstrate how camp can preserve visual aspects of femme culture centring queerly racialized and transgendered femmes.

Although many scholars agree that camp is only fully evocable through myriad examples (Cleto 2019; Nielsen 2016; Robertson 1999), there appears to be some agreement on the four key elements that delineate camp: aestheticism, theatricality, humour, and irony (Babuscio 1993; Newton 1972). Brought together, camp manifests as an aesthetic that is imbued with artifice and theatricality which evokes humour with irony. There are two angles of camp ambivalence that help make femme-ininity intelligible. I will first address the ironic ambivalence of camp, and move on to cover its potential to bridge signification and affect. Following Sontag (1966), camp here is understood as a sensibility that offers a juncture to bring soma and techne together.

Reading Femme-ininity through Camp Disidentification

I contend that camp offers an opportunity to include visual domains while not making them determinants nor repeating the troubles of visibility addressed so far. Camp is often discussed alongside visual arts such as theatre (Muñoz 1999) or fashion (Bolton et al. 2019) due to its heavily visual character. However, camp is not solely visual and its heavy focus on representation does not aim to be recognized as resistant. This is because irony establishes camp's ambivalence, to which I understand as conceptually connected to Muñoz's (1999) concept of disidentification. Situated between identification with and counter-identification against power, disidentification defies conceptualizing power as a fixed discourse. However, it does not conveniently sit midway, but challenges the dichotomic understanding of collusion and confrontation by conceptually reconfiguring resistance. Disidentification "scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes its universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include,

and empower minority identifications" (Muñoz 1999, 31).

Taking inspiration from camp to formulate femme-ininity is helpful because camp disidentification frees QTIPOC femmes from an imperative to intentionally confound norms of femininity nor reductively positions their femininities as compliance. This is because camp disidentification is neither ahistorical nor completely voluntary. According to Muñoz (1999), "camp reimagines a radical future replete with humor and desire," while simultaneously "pointing at oppression with style and humor that is ironically expressed with political ferocity" (25). By means of political ferocity, Core's (1999) statement on camp is illuminating where he wrote one can only camp about something one takes seriously because camp is a "form of historicism viewed histrionically" (80). Concurrently, Newton (1972) also asserts that "only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it camp" (128). Disidentification neither "places ultimate power to corporate patriarchy, relegating no power or agency, nor hastily attribute agency as if marginal social groups can achieve empowerment so easy" (Clark, 2000, 379). Rather, As Muñoz (1999) delineated, it is a queer people of colour's survival strategy to "re-appropriat[e] and [recircuit] mechanisms that are not made for them" (29). In sum, drawing QTIPOC femme-ininity with camp disidentification allows us to extend visuality in its theorization while not rigidly marking resistance as an ultimate end.

I suggest that framing QTIPOC femmes' position as camp disidentification pertinently resolves the issues of strict division between normative and resistant femme-ininity. Although rare, theorists like Hemmings (2007) regard femme camp as a way to take on "styles that uphold a masculine order, a serious play with constructed superficiality" (164), thereby capturing the blurry dynamics between normative femininities femme-ininity. Case (1988) also reads butch-femme aesthetics as camp by connecting the lie of being closeted and camp's pretentious play that undermines the boundaries

between truth and lie. Such an ambivalent character of femme can be aptly pictured via disidentification, and it fits well with Dahl's (2011) aim to understand femme in its instability which is "neither radically queer nor normative, unrecognizable at times and sometimes visually queer, including in terms of activity and passivity, complicity and resistance" (184). Camp captures how QTIPOC femmes disidentify with the conceptualization of femme as belonging to lesbian women, who are implicitly regarded as white and cisgender. Just as Clark (2000) frames lesbian insurgence as camp because "the straight reading bases become twisted into a camp interpretation" (378), now the lesbian femme becomes twisted as camp for QTIPOC femmes.

As much as femme has been home to many feminine-presenting people, its history of excluding QTIPOC femmes should be recognized. To feel QTIPOC femme through camp is helpful precisely because camp requires acknowledgement of such marginalized terrain that grounds disidentification. For instance, Kin (in Al-Kadhi 2017) understands their East Asian femme-ininity as "perseverance in the face of [their] ascribed and inscribed precarity." Here, racialized precarity forms a ground for camp. However, although Sin's camp is grounded in their specific racial politics of location, it does not necessitate nor invalidate other shapes of racial struggles because what underlies camp is the act of acknowledgement and needs not be the single, exclusive answer. Camp's open-ended shape offers a new way to theorize QTIPOC femme marginalization without homogenizing racial divergence. Femme-ininity may even take the shape of oppressive conditions through disidentification without necessarily trumping queer recognition or fulfilling an imperative to be visually different, successfully resolving the problems addressed with regards to femme visibility impasse in previous sections.

While efforts to find lesbian camp in butch masculinity continue to reappear against gay male domination of Queer Theory, Hemmings (2007) writes that "femme doesn't stand a chance of being crowned lesbian-camp queen" (162). Yet,

such a neglecting tendency on femme potential should not be refuted by idealizing QTIPOC subjectivity as a complete voluntarism as I have addressed above. Instead, with camp, what is intended to be subversive assumes less important ground than what is consequentially expressed and embodied as a productive ambivalence. Voluntary intention is probably the least camp thing: however intentionally planned, camp should speak with pretentious elegance grounded in an embodied understanding of oppression. To conclude, femme visuality is best reformulated through camp disidentification that accommodates racially diverse shapes of femme-ininity that do not prize one archetype of queer resistance.

Camp as Sensibility and its Constitutive Contingency

One reason that the disidentificatory character of femme was often evoked yet under-addressed as camp is that most interlocutors regarded camp as crucially tied to a representational preoccupation that had to be avoided. For instance, Dahl (2012, 59) warns against understanding femme as camp because it reduces femme to "the superstructure of the superficial." However, I maintain that femme camp exceeds visual dimensions when considered as a sensibility. Highlighting femme-ininity through camp sensibility, Dahl's (2012) view that "femme is simultaneously semiotic and material" (185) can be further extended in my argument. Sontag (1966) defines camp as a sensibility, which is distinct from an idea. She wrote that "any sensibility that can be crammed into the mold of a system is no longer a sensibility at all, as it has hardened into an idea" (Sontag 1966, 3). Rather, sensibility is always elicited in epicene contradictions and failures (Sontag 1966). Accordingly, if understood as sensibility, femme-ininity is no longer reduced into significative dimensions because it is aesthetically "enacted rather than explained" (Cleto 2019, 11). Indeed, "camp is as camp does" (Cleto 2019, 13). At the same time, by means of aestheticism, which Sontag (1966) saw as a constituting attitude of camp sensibility, representational elements play a crucial part to

elicit this bodily experience. Thus, sensibility accounts for both somatic experience and stylized performance (techne), contrary to some framing camp as a mere 'outward aesthetic.'

My approach is not to move away from signification but to "stitch the two poles provisionally" (Muñoz 2006, 682). To redefine femme-ininity through a QTIPOC lens, applying camp sensibility is to situate the disputing parties of Cultural Studies and corporeal inquiries in communication. Sensibility simultaneously constitutes ontology and epistemology. As Sontag (1966) quotes Wilde, camp is both "to *be* a work of art or *wear* it" (4, italics mine). Making use of camp sensibility to rethink femme-ininity in light of QTIPOC subjects offers a productive way to incorporate aesthetics and affect together without falsely opposing the two. Sensibility becomes a somatechnic window to rethink QTIPOC femme-ininity in its full visual complexities. In this regard, sensibility operates as "the alterity that traverses and ultimately breaks any given regime of the representable" (Sabsay 2018, 86) for femme discourse. This compensates for what I found limiting in corporeal critiques of femme-ininity: the somatic regarded as oppositional to signification. Hence, I employ camp sensibility as a mode of integrating somatechnics while not losing grasp of the visual elements of QTIPOC femme culture.

Framing femme visual culture as sensibility allows us to track some fleeting shades of femme insurgence without presupposing a conclusive judgment as what makes it camp is the initiation of sensibility and not recognition. The vague plane of potentially femme-inine sensibility may contain contradictions within. Perhaps femme sensibility arises from intention, disguised as improvisation, from carefully curated accidents, or both. Camp is an episodic and provisional sensibility, and therefore is open-ended by definition. The "unpredictable and untraceable character of camp" (Cleto 2019, 13) concurs well with Dahl's gesture towards femme politics of imperceptibility. QTIPOC femmes are recreating femininity with "the masquerade, the play and ambivalence that form the core of camp sensibility" (Hemmings 2007, 163). In

conclusion, I offer a refreshing alternative to theorizing femme with camp disidentificatory sensibility that envelops femme visuality without falling into a visibility impasse and crucially incorporates somatechnics.

Conclusion: Portrait of Femmes on Camp Fire

> *"femme forged in the fire of its own complex, unresolved human possibilities and hungers…"*
> — *Hollibaugh in Dahl and Volcano*
> *(2008, 185)*

Here is my portrait of the femmes on the camp-fire. You can gaze at the flares, but I suggest you also attune your ear to hear, and feel their irony. I used the metaphor of a portrait, but this in no way assumes that there is only one subject in the painting, or that my portrait is the only one. In fact, the portraits are in the fire, burning in the ephemerality of femme performance. Muñoz (1999) used the verb 'listening' to discern minute oscillations of the queerly racialized performance. Listening to the QTIPOC femme camp-fire, the melody may come to you as a sensibility.

My main argument was that the QTIPOC shape of femme-ininity is illuminated along the lines of camp sensibility, operating as consequential disidentification. I addressed femme as camp with two registers of ambivalence, which focus on camp's characteristics of disidentificatory irony and somatechnic sensibility. The first register addresses an ambiguity of its content, thinking QTIPOC femme-ininity as disidentification towards femme. Here, visuality is neither elided nor regarded as a determining factor to 'recognize' femme. Instead, with irony, racialized and gendered injustice forms a basis of femme camp performance. Second, with regards to formative ambivalence, femme-ininity is thought as a somatechnic sensibility that is neither solely corporeal nor cultural, but as an ambivalently situated ephemeral instantiation that grounds the first register of disidentification. Irony becomes a constitutive factor to elicit sensibility, however crucially interacting with significatory dimension.

My contribution to the scholarly discourse is twofold. First, it endeavours to sketch more affirmative shapes of QTIPOC femme-ininity. Second, it is also a theoretical nod to a larger dialogue between signification and corporeal-affective turn in Critical Theory. Third, I centred QTIPOC femme-ininity to review femme as a racialized gender. This paper only marks an embarkation of a much broader project, and I aspire that it sparks more dialogue centring my QTIPOC siblings.

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